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All children should be given the opportunity to begin school at the age of four at public expense. Research and experience show that the first four or five years of life are the most active mentally and physically, and children of those ages profit from a wide variety of activities and relationships. A school program adapted to four- and five-year-olds would have four broad objectives--emotional security and self-respect, responsible social relations, physical well-being, and intellectual growth in curiosity, language, readiness, and listening and observing abilities. Such a program, which would develop children who are eager and ready to learn, would require changes in first grade curriculums. It would also mean a decrease in the need for later remedial education and an increase in the capabilities and joys of the population. (LP)

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Introduction

The development of intellectual ability and of intellectual interest is fundamental to the achievement of all the goals of American education. Yet these qualities are greatly affected by what happens to children before they reach school. A growing body of research and experience demonstrates that by the age of six most children have already developed a considerable part of the intellectual ability they will possess as adults. Six is now generally accepted as the normal age of entrance to school. We believe that this practice is obsolete. All children should have the opportunity to go to school at public expense beginning at the age of four.

In this statement we shall explain why we advocate this extension of education, briefly describe the type of program envisioned, and indicate the financial and other measures required.

The Need for Early Childhood Education

Research shows clearly that the first four or five years of a child's life are the period of most rapid growth in physical and mental characteristics and of greatest susceptibility to environmental influences. Consequently, it is in the early years that deprivations are most disastrous in their effects. They can be compensated for only with great difficulty in later years, and then probably not in full. Furthermore, it appears that it is harder to modify harmful learnings than to acquire new ones. Finally, experience indicates that exposure to a wide variety of activities and of social and mental interactions with children and adults greatly enhances a child's ability to learn. Few homes provide enough of these opportunities. It is reasonable to conclude that the postponement of an educational contribution by society until children reach the age of six generally limits the flowering of their potentials.

Family life and family love are among the most cherished of American values. In addition, they are important to the healthy development of the individual physically and spiritually, and they are basic to his happiness. They are regarded as a birthright of every child and parent. Moreover, except in extreme cases of neglect and mistreatment at home, it is hard to conceive of an institutional alternative to the home and family that could do as well.

Therefore, although early schooling is needed, family life must be strengthened, not replaced. The need is for a complement, not an alternative, to family life. But the need is compelling.

Those children commonly called "disadvantaged" are in the greatest need of early schooling, for they are most in need of help in developing their ability to live independently and creatively in a modern society. They are disadvantaged precisely because the cultures into which they are born prepare them poorly for modern life. Many are further disadvantaged because, victimized by racial prejudice, they develop a disparaging image of themselves by the age of five or six. It is imperative that American society provide these children, in their most formative years, with helpful cultural characteristics and the healthy image of their human worth that their personal progress requires. At the present time, schooling for four-year-olds is rarely free of cost to the parents and therefore is least available to many children in most desperate need of it.

But not only those commonly considered disadvantaged are disadvantaged in their lives at home. The pampered also are disadvantaged; so are those whose parents are obsessed with the need to impress and achieve; so are those, whatever their economic background, whose parents show them little love; so are those who have little chance to play with other children or with children of other backgrounds; so are those with physical handicaps. Early education could help all these children.

Early education is advisable for all children, not merely because of the need to offset any disadvantages in their background, but also because they are ready by the age of four for a planned fostering of their development and because educators know some of the ways to foster it through school programs. Early education has long been available to the well-to-do, and it is commendable that governments are now acting on the need to make it available to some of the poor. But the large middle group should have the same opportunities.

The opportunity for early education at public expense should therefore be universal. The nation would benefit in the greater development of its people's talents and in the reduction of the need for expensive remedial work and of the incidence of dropout with its attendant economic and social ills. The nation would benefit, too, from the knowledge that public educational funds are being spent with greater efficiency, from a new national unity based on increased respect for nonwhite groups as they develop their talents more completely, and from the awareness that greater recognition is being given to the ideal of human dignity. Individuals would benefit in all these ways, as well as in the enjoyment of a richer childhood and a lifetime lived at a higher level of achievement than is typical today.

Beginning at what age should the opportunity for education be offered at public expense?

For several reasons, the Educational Policies Commission recommends that it begin at the age of four. These two additional years are years about which there is considerable knowledge regarding the contribution that organized education can make. These are years in which many parents deem it desirable for children to have a few hours away from home during the day. A two-year extension is also more feasible financially than a longer extension; indeed, public kindergartens are already common, and for many places the extension would amount to only one year.

The first three years of life are probably even more crucial than the fourth and fifth. But too little is known about the ways in which such young children can be helped outside their homes. Efforts to help present or future parents improve family living would perhaps be more effective. We strongly endorse such efforts.

Schooling at Ages Four and Five

In proposing that school extend downward to the age of four, the Commission does not intend a simple downward extension of, or preparation for, the program now offered in most first grades. We envision a program uniquely adapted to children of ages four and five; the program for six-year-olds would be altered to take into account the earlier schooling of the children, rather than vice versa. The program suitable for four- and five-year-olds differs in basic ways from the traditional first grade, for it is not focused on reading, writing, and arithmetic and it need not be an all-day program.

What is here advocated is not preschooling but an integral and a vitally important part of schooling. Education in this two-year period can affect the character of the child and all his future life more deeply than his education at any later period. Early childhood education, properly conducted, promises significant benefits to American life; poorly conducted, it can do more harm than good. It is therefore essential that this schooling be conducted by persons professionally prepared for the task.

To be entrusted with such a responsibility and to discharge it successfully, the teacher needs to have an understanding of children and a knowledge of methods which she can get only from

study and experience. Little children tend to be so active physically and mentally that no preset pattern of experience can turn to maximum advantage the many opportunities for development that present themselves. A teacher needs the almost total flexibility required to make the necessary decisions from moment to moment and the considerable competence required to make the best decisions.

The objectives of instruction in these years lie in four major areas—intellectual, emotional, social, and physical. The intellectual goals include the promotion of curiosity, growth of language, and generation of readiness for the intellectual activities that will come in later years. They also include the development of the ability to handle concepts, to perceive and meet problems, and to observe and listen. For example, a child who knows the joy of being read to by an adult learns the pleasure of intellectual activity, and of books in particular. Children who know this pleasure from their own homes still benefit from hearing other adults read new things in new settings. On the other hand, children who do not even know what reading is, or what books are, desperately need to acquire this knowledge; otherwise, they may have great difficulty in learning to read at a later date.

One of the main contributions which early education can make to a child's intellectual development is the enlargement of his span of experience. Under skilled guidance, a child's new contacts with the world become new learnings and open new possibilities. There are new worlds to discover in virtually every situation—the world of nature, the world of play, the economic world, the world of oneself, the world of one's relations with others. Before entering school all children have some experience of some of these worlds and can benefit from more; some children have surprisingly scanty experience of anything and learn surprisingly little from such exposure as they have. Every real learning requires a basis in the learner's past experiences. To see some-

thing on television or even in life is not necessarily to see it in any meaningful sense—that is, to learn from it.

The emotional goals of early education include promotion of children's sense of security and self-respect; there are no more important prerequisites to learning, happiness, or mental health. To this end, a child must find that the school is a congenial place. He must frequently have a sense of accomplishment, a sense that he is able to learn by himself and to help others. He must feel that he is respected and valued.

Relations between school and home are particularly vital at the nursery level. A little child adjusts most naturally to a new environment if his parents are often there. It should be common practice for mothers to accompany children to school and become involved in school experiences. Both parent and teacher can also profit from association with each other. The teacher profits from the parent's knowledge of each child, and parents can learn ways in which they might help further the goals of early education. It is highly desirable that the parents recognize what early education is trying to do for their children.

Early schooling should be part of the excitement of childhood. The curiosity, inventiveness, and spontaneous energy of young children are sources from which a lifetime of learning can develop. A school program for these children should therefore offer experiences designed to enhance these qualities.

The third major area in which early education seeks development is that of a child's relations with other children and adults. A young child tends to see himself as the center of the world. If a child is to lead a happy and responsible life, however, he must balance his egocentricity with a concern for and responsibility toward others. He must learn that other children, too, are "me's." On the other hand, if he never asserts himself or if he has been taught to obey others blindly, he must learn that he, too, can con-

tribute and that he, too, has rights that are to be respected. By the age of four, most children have learned certain things about their social relationships. They have developed a code of conduct, and they have developed attitudes toward children and adults. The teacher of four- and five-year-olds has a striking opportunity to further their social abilities in ways beneficial to themselves and to others. This opportunity stems from the fact that the children's school experience is likely to be their first extended social experience outside the home and with many children their own age.

Finally, early education must devote considerable attention to the child's physical well-being and development. Where parents fail to do so, the school should provide the medical examination of the child, so that visual, dental, or health problems can be discovered early and given appropriate attention. The hours of schooling will probably make necessary the provision of some food to each child, and the school should take steps to remedy poor nutrition. The teacher should also provide children with the physical activity they crave and the rests they need, should value the children's development more than the appearance of order, and should help develop proper health habits.

The objectives and program here suggested have long characterized the practice of many nursery school educators. If such education were universalized, most children would reach six years of age with a level of development strikingly different from that which they bring to school today. More of them would probably resemble in general development and learning ability the children who come to school today from the most favored homes. These are not necessarily the wealthiest homes. Rather they are those in which parents take the most responsible, rational, and appropriate roles in the rearing of their children. They are homes which give love, inspiration, challenge, support, and experience. They are homes where parents serve as models of rationality and developed

intellectual capacities. The children who come from such homes have an appetite for learning and great readiness for it and for the school. Many first grades in their present form could not meet the needs of children so capable and so eager to learn. With universal early childhood education, almost every child would have a higher starting point in knowledge and developed ability. Almost every child would view the teacher and the school less as a source of answers than as a source of encouragement to exploration and self-realization.

We therefore think it important that the program for six-year-olds be based on the program for four- and five-year-olds. The need for this close association does not necessarily imply any one administrative structure. The early years could, for example, simply be attached to existing elementary schools, or a new school could be created to encompass the first four to eight years of education. However, the importance of continuity in the program suggests that it might be unwise to set off the first two years as a separate entity.

Many questions about early childhood education, as about all levels of education, have as yet no definitive, generally applicable answers. The best preparation for the teachers, the optimum length of the school day, the best class size, the contributions which parents can make, and the ways in which teachers can elicit those contributions—these are some of the only partly answered questions. Each school will give its tentative answers. But some of the needs are known already. The teachers should have an understanding of children, a knowledge of human development, a strong curiosity about the world, and an acquaintance with various theories and practices of early childhood education. They should work closely with the parents of the children. The classes should be small enough to permit individualized attention. And the goal should be to promote each child's intellectual, social, emotional, and physical development. We believe that such teach-

ers, pursuing such goals in such circumstances, will contribute significantly to the joy of childhood and the subsequent well-being of the children who come their way.

There are 8,400,000 four- and five-year-olds in the present population. Five million of them are not now in school. It is difficult to estimate the cost of providing educational opportunities for all these children, but it is well within the nation's capacity to pay.

The Educational Policies Commission recommends that the federal government provide general support to the schooling of four- and five-year-olds. But all levels of government must co-operate in seeking the funds, and early childhood education should be financed and administered as an integral part of public education. The money would bring many returns. The number of children requiring costly, slow, and sometimes fruitless remedial services at the elementary or secondary level would probably decline drastically. The return to the nation in enhanced capabilities of the population would be immense. The return to children in a more joyful, creative, and productive childhood would be immeasurable.

The recommendations in this publication are those of the Educational Policies Commission, a commission of the National Education Association of the United States and the American Association of School Administrators. Publication in this form does not constitute formal approval by the sponsoring associations.